



After Hours, Slow House takes place roughly once a month on a Saturday. Guests can unwind and connect with others, or retreat to a quiet corner with a book or a craft activity. ST PHOTO: CHERIE LOK



Cherie Lok

On a Saturday in mid-August, I make plans to spend the afternoon with a bunch of people I have never met before.

My instructions arrive in the form of a TikTok: Take Exit B at Marymount MRT station, follow the covered walkway, head past the hulking grey buildings that feel anything but convivial, keep going, cross this road, take a left, get in the lift and leave your shoes at the door.

I push it open and find myself in what looks like somebody's mid-century modern Build-To-Order flat. The floor is covered in a patchwork of tastefully mismatched rugs. There are slouchy caterpillar couches and an electric blue feature wall, onto which is bolted a shelf of eclectic knick-knacks. Music is playing too, a tasteful rotation of recent Hot 100 hits.

But we are in a commercial property, not a residential estate, and my host, Ren Lee, does not actually live here.

The 24-year-old National University of Singapore student rents this space on select weekends, turning it into a "living room" where strangers can hang out.

He was inspired by his eight-month trip to Vietnam and China in 2025, where, while on a break from his degree, he attended various social events. "During this period, I met a lot of people who brought me immense joy," recalls the third-year computer science student.

He wanted other Singaporeans to be able to experience the serendipity of connecting with strangers, but was aware not everyone had the privilege of being able to spend so much time overseas.

"It got me to reflect on the state of Singapore right now. People are more socially awkward and risk-averse. I think the beauty of life is meeting other people, and that's something I felt was missing back home."

Though Singapore has its fair share of social mixers, most are geared towards helping people find love or friendship. His event, on the other hand, has "no agenda". "For me, it's more of letting our guests see where the afternoon takes

ROOM FOR SMALL TALK

Young people spend their Saturdays relaxing in a stranger's living room

them," he says.

After Hours, Slow House first opened its doors in February and takes place roughly once a month on a Saturday.

It is pretty much as advertised: a space where you can lie back and have long, meandering conversations with fellow guests, or retreat to a quiet corner with a book or a craft activity.

About 80 per cent of guests come alone, says Lee. Some drop in for a couple of hours while others linger late into the night. Not everyone is a natural extrovert, but most do make an effort to socialise. He helps to break the ice by introducing them to one another.

Most participants are in their early to mid-20s, though there are a few 40- and 50-somethings scattered around the room. So in the space of an hour, I go from chatting about national service with a 19-year-old recruit (he is having a miserable time) to family planning with a 52-year-old life coach (no plans to have children any time soon, thanks for asking).

Alyssa, a 25-year-old who decided to give this event a shot because "Singapore can be quite lonely", asks Robin Fan, the 52-year-old, why he wants to spend his day with Gen Zs.

"Why not?" he replies with a shrug. "They're interesting people and they have interesting perspectives."

He says he is at the age where "you're not supposed to want to make new friends", and most of his

existing friends are busy with their families, so how else is he supposed to connect with people?

With the frank questions and overlapping chatter, the vibe is not unlike that of an extended family gathering. As 24-year-old Renee Tu observes: "It's like being at my grandparents' place and all my cousins are here."

She is at the corner of a table, working her way through a paint-by-numbers set, but gets sucked into conversation now and then. Socialisation, as it turns out, is a bit of an inevitability in this space.

Zen Aw showed up to the second session of After Hours, Slow House in March with the intention of parking herself somewhere to finish a university assignment.

"There was a girl sitting opposite me doing some handicraft, and she asked me, 'What are you doing? Why'd you bring laptop and everything?' Then we started to yap and realised that our energies match."

In the end, she did not finish her assignment, but made a new friend. She also became a volunteer, helping Lee plan this bi-monthly event, now on its fifth run.

"I just felt bad for him. I can see he puts his heart into this and we need to help anchor him so he doesn't burn out," says the 28-year-old fourth-year business analytics student at the Singapore University of Social Sciences. "We want this event to have longevity. When you try to create something good for people, you have to make sure it doesn't hurt you too."

Running this passion project has

not been easy, especially when attendance doubles with each iteration. What started as a cosy gathering of 20 people is now a 100-strong logistical conundrum.

"A lot of people have reached out asking how they can contribute because, by the third run, I was making a net loss of \$3,000," says Lee. He is grateful for his budding community, which pitches in by sponsoring food and drinks.

The costs of running this event also mean he has little choice but to charge for entry. General admission is fixed at \$35 and includes board games, as well as free-flow snacks and packet drinks.

"I've realised that by charging them, it helps people appreciate where they are, and they're more intentional about how they spend their time here. But I'll try to keep things affordable," he says, adding that he plans to host future versions of the event in cafes like Acoustics Coffee Bar in Farrer Park.

In any case, the entry fee does not seem to have deterred guests. As the sun sets, more people stream in. Dinner is procured via a GrabFood group order by various people. A DJ starts spinning in the corner. A bunch of guests band together to finish a puzzle, flipping all the pieces over and matching them by numbers instead in the interest of time.

In the centre of the room, a game of "Who Am I?" gets going. One girl is assigned a recently infamous local politician and the entire circle blinks in confusion. "Never heard of him," someone says.

The room is booked till 6am, though the last guests leave around 2am or 3am. On my way out at 10.40pm, I encounter a group of new arrivals, bearing snacks from 7-Eleven. The door opens and they stumble, giggling, into the light.

SOMEWHERE TO DILLY-DALLY

Later in the month, I drop by another "living room". This time, it is a room in Bishan Community Club jazzed up with a few camping chairs and crates that double as tables. In one corner is a table stacked with board games, sweets and conversation cards.

The Dilly Dally Space brands itself as somewhere for youth aged 17 to 35 to "slow down, hang out and just be". It is run by Friendzone SG, a social enterprise which organises

events that help Singaporeans build connections in their neighbourhoods and workplaces.

It was launched in August as part of the National Youth Council's (NYC) efforts to create more third spaces.

"One of the aspirations that emerged from our SG Youth Plan engagements with youth was for more spaces that youth could hang out, pursue their hobbies and interests, and take part in activities," says an NYC spokesperson. "Three in five young people also believe that such spaces will give them the opportunity to meet people from more diverse backgrounds."

These spaces become all the more crucial as young people mature and enter the working world, says Friendzone co-founder Tham Jun Han, 33. "Once people become adults, it's harder to find the time and energy to hang out somewhere, especially somewhere with air-con."

The concept of a third place – now often used interchangeably with "third space" – was first articulated by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book, *The Great Good Place*.

He defined third places as "public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work". In these spaces, conversation is the main activity, and the mood should be playful.

"But there's one thing missing from his definition, and it is that people need to make new friends in these spaces," says Tham.

He hopes to spark these connections by first giving young people a low-commitment space to be themselves. Along the way, his team will introduce participants to one another and encourage them to bond over shared interests.

"Our end goal is to encourage people who visit to contribute back to the space by running activities."

Warm lighting helps the room feel more cosy, as does the low furniture. Tham and his team avoided proper tables and chairs because he did not want it to become a study or co-working space.

"Many third spaces in Singapore have this problem. Young adults naturally turn it into a study room and then it gets quiet. But we want people to talk and make friends."

He keeps the music on as well, because past experiences have taught him that once the room gets too quiet, conversation dies.

So far, the turnout has been modest – around four to five people milling about at any given time during the opening hours from 3pm to 8pm every Thursday. Admission is free.

Surely they would get a better turnout on a Friday or Saturday afternoon? On the contrary. "We realised that among young adults, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays are reserved for close friends and family. So when they want to make new friends, they'll do it on the weekdays. It feels like a lower commit-

FINDING FRIENDSHIP

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ZEN AW, who attended After Hours, Slow House in March intending to park herself there to finish a university assignment, but made a new friend instead.

ment," Tham tells me.

Considering that The Dilly Dally Space is still in its pre-pilot phase and minimal marketing has been done to promote it, he is satisfied with the response so far.

CAN YOU MAKE FRIENDS HERE?

During my visit to The Dilly Dally Space, I met Julian Kang, a 27-year-old engineer who has brought a friend along.

"I just moved back to Singapore from the US, so I thought this would be a nice way to meet people," says Kang, who graduated from Purdue University in 2025.

"When I first moved back, I hadn't really reconnected with my old friend groups. My poly friends had their own uni friends, but all my uni friends were overseas, so I had to make new friends."

He is optimistic, having kept in touch with some of the people he met at Friendzone's other events. "I mean, you're not guaranteed to make friends, but you never try, never know."

However, his friend, Chris Seah, is not thinking that far ahead. "I'm just here to chill," says the 28-year-old entertainer. "I wanted to see for myself what these kinds of spaces are like and whether they actually work. I was really just curious."

A few weeks prior, I ask the attendees of After Hours, Slow House a similar question: Have you made any new friends tonight?

"I had a good time. I thought my social battery would run out, but it didn't," says 26-year-old Windsor, who declines to give his last name. He has spent eight hours in the makeshift living room, painting and chatting. "But whether I made friends, I don't know. People usually don't follow up after these sorts of events."

Aw, the After Hours regular, says if you are serious about building connections, you have to keep coming back. "Then you'll start to see familiar faces, and it's like, 'Hey, what's up? How have you been since the last time?' The more you come, the cosier it gets, and the more connections you form."

Ultimately, she advises attendees to leave their expectations at the door. "People make friends at different levels. Some people turn out to be acquaintances, but there are also people you find you genuinely want to build a connection with. But that will take time. It's not like I can meet you and immediately have a heart-to-heart talk."

So maybe you will walk out of there with a new Instagram mutual or an acquaintance you meet for coffee once a year. You might find your new best friend. You might find nothing at all.

Worth a shot? All it takes is some small talk and your Saturday afternoon.

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GIVING BACK

Our end goal is to encourage people who visit to contribute back to the space by running activities.

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THAM JUN HAN, on Friendzone SG's The Dilly Dally Space.



The Dilly Dally Space in Bishan Community Club is open every Thursday, allowing young people to "slow down, hang out and just be". PHOTO: FRIENDZONE SG